

# **THE RIDER OF THE MOHAVE**

*A Western Story*

By JAMES FELLOM

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# **THE RIDER OF THE MOHAVE**

## PROLOGUE—HE RIDES BY NIGHT

It was three in the morning, but Geerusalem had not yet closed its eyes. There was too much undug gold in the hills; it was too handy—too easy come, easy go; the days, too short; the pleasures, too wanton, too alluring. The camp of Geerusalem promenaded, gambled, danced, fought, debauched the night away, waiting for to-morrow. Far out on desolate Soapweed Plains, rose the intermittent, yelping wail-bark of a coyote.

The back door of a little store that fronted on the main street opened cautiously. The interior of what was a kitchen was dark; the flower-garden yard into which it gave, was also dark. The shadowy form of a man emerged and halted; he peered carefully about through the gloom. A smaller figure followed, pausing on the threshold—a woman, her white apron and snowy hair quite visible. The man turned, took her in his arms impulsively, and held her close to his breast.

“Don’t you worry, ma. I’ll be droppin’ round again, two weeks from to-night—sure’s sic ’em!” he whispered, as he kissed her.

The woman wept softly. “Oh, Jerome, darling, why don’t you quit this awful thing?” she sobbed, clinging to him. “Don’t you know how my heart’s just breaking?”

“Too late, ma. I oughter’ve quit ’fore I begun. If I started quittin’ now, they wouldn’t let me, would they? But I’m tellin’ you; don’t think about me. They can’t ketch me. I’ve bin goin’ it three years, ain’t I? Well, then, when you see Tinnemaha Pete,

tell him to leave you a chunk of that ore. An' see that he don't tell nobody about findin' it. I figger it's a bonanza. Mebby, that'll mean better days. Well, we'll see what's doin'. Now, I'd better be scootin', honey. An' don't you worry, see?" He kissed her again, tenderly, many times, breathing his last injunction into her ear.

A few seconds later he had slipped like a shadow across the yard and was stealing out of an alleyway between two adobe buildings, heading for the back street. That street was black, deserted, the nocturnal population of the camp confining itself to the bright lights and attractions that converted the one business thoroughfare into a brilliant avenue, noisy with ribald merrymaking and adventure.

Near by stood his horse. He reached it and, with a vigilant glance about, threw back one of the flaps of his saddlebags and plunged a rummaging hand inside. It came forth with a folded piece of wrapping paper and several nails he had placed there the day before.

With a reckless chuckle, he wound his bandanna around his face leaving only his eyes exposed; then he mounted and rode off to the next cross street, and thence to the brilliantly lighted hub of the town. The bulletin board of the *Geerusalem Searchlight*, an afternoon newspaper, loomed big and black on the edge of the sidewalk, in the full glare of window lights. It was one of those moments when the immediate vicinity was clear of promenaders.

Seeing this, the rider spurred over to the bulletin board, unfolded the sheet of wrapping paper, and nailed it on the

black surface with the butt of his six-shooter. Then, he caracoled his horse about, fired a volley into the air and, throwing the whole strength of his lungs into a wild howl, waved his hat to a crowd of men standing before the Miners' Hotel, and dashed away around the nearest street corner, bound for the lonely, trailless reaches of the Mohave Desert far to the south.

The horde of curious night revelers swarming to the spot, a few seconds later, read with varying degrees of emotion the rough printed notice on the bulletin board:

I bin lookin three year for Sheriff Warburton an cant find him. Ill give \$5,000 to git akquainted with the county fameous detektive.

Your lovin bandit,  
BILLY GEE.

## CHAPTER I—MANIA AND DREAMS

Lemuel Huntington had told himself a thousand times that his Dot must have an education. He had long since become infatuated with the notion. It had him gripped as tenaciously as the seductive toils of romance had the imaginative Dot enmeshed. It was a consuming mania with him.

“If I got to steal the money, she’s goin’ to college—the dream of her darlin’ dead mother. S’help me, I’ll turn thief if I got to!”

Lemuel, the failure, was fifty-one—the age when most men begin to slow down, whether they want to or not. Twenty years before, he and his little bride had left a perfectly good living in Iowa to try a short cut to fortune in California. The fact that more often than not distance is a most captivating beckoner, did not occur to these happy newlyweds until they reached the Golden State and found that a tremendous army—also seeking sudden wealth—had preceded them, and was daily being augmented by regiments of recruits from the four corners of the globe.

The discovery appalled them—their capital being alarmingly small; and nearly two years of drifting from little town to little town, just managing to get by, took the heart out of them.

Then, one day, Lemuel brought home news of a tract of government land known as Soapweed Plains, on the north rim of the Mohave Desert, with enticing reports of rich mineral belts in the adjacent mountain ranges. It looked like the opportunity for which they had waited. They would homestead,



and in a few years Huntington would be a name indelibly branded on the cattle industry of the State. And there was the further golden prospect of rich mines!

Packing their few belongings, husband and wife bought tickets to the dismal wind-whipped station of Mirage, on the Mohave & Southwestern Railroad, and spent two everlasting days shoeing a trinity of stubborn burros over a hell waste, into the new land of promise. But again the captivating beckoner had tricked them. Soapweed Plains was a sweltering realm of sagebrush, sand and sidewinders, twenty-five miles wide, divided off from the rest of the desert universe by a horseshoe barricade of saw-edge peaks and table mountains that abutted a sky-line mesa to the south—and by serenading coyotes by night.

In despair, the Huntingtons filed on two quarter sections of sand and rubble, the west side of their claims overlapping a bunch-grass hill; the narrow strip on the east was handy to those scant benefits of irrigation so grudgingly bestowed by the tepid disappearing-reappearing Mohave River. Here, at least, they might coax a living out of the soil, said Lemuel dolefully. It was a permanent anchorage, if nothing more, sighed his wife. And they started grubbing away a site for a home and killing the sidewinding rattlesnakes.

Soon, they found that the potato thrived, as did the melon and alfalfa; found, too, that it was a paradise for bees. They contrived to get a cow and heifer, a span of desert-broke horses, and a rattletrap buckboard. Prospectors learned about the Huntington ranch and, finding it handier to go there after certain commodities than to far-off Mirage, began patronizing

it. Its popularity grew. As a result, Lemuel added a stock of bacon, beans, condensed milk, sugar, matches, and such staple supplies to his assorted farm products, and reaped a comfortable profit therefrom.

Then Dot came—and the lonely brush ranch became the nucleus of Lemuel and Emily's resurrected hopes, for they began planning wonderful things for their first-born, and, not the least among these things, an education that would make her a great lady of accomplishments some day.

But the years dragged by, one after the other, in that out-of-the-way land, so woefully lacking in transportation—empty-handed years almost, that held out scarcely more than a possibility at any time that those precious plans of theirs would ever be fulfilled. It would take a fat purse indeed to send Dot to select Longwell Seminary in San Francisco and keep her there in becoming luxury until she blossomed forth a chosen daughter of California's élite.

When Dot was twelve her brave little mother died, and for a long time afterward, Lemuel went about like a man desperately searching for something he had lost without knowing just what it was. His resurrected hopes died with her, and were buried. Everything slowed down to a point where he merely held on to a bare living for himself and his child.

To-day, he was a failure, that child eighteen, while the only remaining echo of the precious plans to make Dot a grand lady was this secret wild mania of his, seething in the core of his brain, to see that daughter educated before they laid him beside the trim little grave in the garden.

Perhaps it was this same mania of his that now led him to haunt the nearest place where brains forgathered—the gold camp of Geerusalem, four miles northeast of the Huntington ranch—and to get to hobnobbing with its insolent brotherhood of mining engineers, promoters, assayers, and attorneys—a type of individual that looms up in the mind of the crude Southwest as prodigious as totem poles, omniscient and omnipotent.

Whatever it was that made Lemuel enjoy being the butt of this uppish fraternity's quips and sneers, and come back regularly for more, hardly matters. Month in and month out, as often as he could get away from the ranch, he would saddle a horse and ride to Geerusalem, and spend the day strutting around with the forty-five caliber brains of the camp. Accordingly, day after day, Dot, the imaginative, was left to herself and the weaving of her wistful, romantic dreams.

She was a bright little body, this eighteen-year-old daughter of Lemuel, the failure; face so frank and sensitive, hair so soft and wavy and glossy, throat so round and smooth. Her eyes were large and brown, and sometimes quite sad from gazing too long into the monotonous distances out of whose blue haze nothing of living substance ever came. She had grown to charming young womanhood, but she still retained the fanciful mind of her pinafore days—the little story-teller had survived as her playmate, Frank Norris would have said—with all a youngster's fascination for impossible stories of impossible beings.

She would sit by the hour dreaming of handsome blond heroes rescuing beautiful maidens from the clutches of Tatarian

villains, with wicked flowing black mustaches and bushy eyebrows, of magnificent daredevil bandits succoring helpless widows and orphans, of notorious Billy Gee even, about whose wild, desperate exploits up and down the Mohave and Colorado Deserts she had heard so much, of hairbreadth escapes, furious bloody duels, and brilliant weddings.

The isolated ranch was an ideal spot for the painting of just such thrilling mind pictures. She could sit on the front porch and look across the gray desolation of plain that stretched to the violet and yellow scallop of range twenty miles eastward, and visualize in that void of undulating air currents every scene her fertile imagination conjured up for her. She lived those scenes, every one of them. They were big moments in her life; palpitating, vivid moments—moments that made her dreary, humdrum existence worth while to her.

“Nothing ever happens out here,” she would sometimes murmur to the eternal sameness of the plains. “Nobody ever comes this way, even. I wish daddy would sell the ranch and move to Geerusalem or somewhere—where things happen, where people laugh and talk and visit.”

On a number of occasions, Lemuel had found her sitting on the front porch, musing into the solitudes, eyes brilliant, cheeks aglow, her parted lips moving.

“Gosh, what a pity!” he had lamented to himself each time, as he went tiptoeing away. “It’s them fine brains of hers workin’. I tell you, Em’ly, wife, she’s goin’ to be the great lady you figgered on, if I got to sell my soul to do it. I’m jest watchin’ for a chanct. You wait an’ see!”

It was well on toward noon of an August day. A fiery sun was churning the floor of Soapweed Plains into a stormy ocean of heat waves. Lemuel had gone to Geerusalem on his customary hobnobbing expedition. Dot, her housework completed, sat reading in the shade of the passion-flower vine that trellised the porch, a novel borrowed from Mrs. Agatha Liggs, a widow who kept a small dry goods store in the camp.

Suddenly, breaking on the dead silence like muffled shots, came the sound of hoofs. Dot dropped her book and sprang to her feet expectantly, for the riders who passed that way, bound to and from the unimportant desert station of Mirage, were few indeed and far between. The next instant she was staring at a lone horseman approaching, not along the road but from across country, from the direction of the violet and yellow scallop of range that formed the magical setting of all her romantic dreams!

She stared in unbelief, amazed for the moment. Then she noticed that he was hatless, that the whole side of his head, the whole front of his dirty, white shirt, were crimson with blood, that he reeled drunkenly, lifelessly in the saddle.

Aghast at the spectacle, she gazed on, rooted to the spot, until the exhausted horse stumbled up to the barred gate and stopped, drooping, rocking on quivering legs. Out of the gate she darted then, threw down the bars and led the animal up to the house, her heart fluttering with excitement and horror.

The rider was in a half swoon, mumbling thickly. Above his right ear was a long, bloody furrow, like the plow of a bullet. The bandanna he had had for a bandage had slipped down over

his face, neglected. It was saturated. He had been bleeding for hours, was her horrifying thought. A glance told her that he was a stranger. That same glance informed her that he was probably twenty-five, fairly good-looking even through his coating of dust and blood, and that he wore a double cartridge belt and a brace of six-shooters, one of which he still held gripped in his hand.

Ordinarily, she would have been quite unable to handle the dead weight he represented, but now she managed to drag him out of the saddle and into the house without being particularly conscious of the effort. She got him on the parlor lounge finally and plunged into the work of bathing his wound and dressing it. Then she tore away his sodden shirts, replaced them with two of her father's, and brought a dipper of water and poured it in little swallows down his throat.

Seating herself in a chair beside him, she looked him over curiously, studied him. Who was he? What was he? The wound? Under less shocking circumstances, it was quite probable he would have proved a big treat to her vivid imagination. But now there somehow seemed to be too much tragic reality about him to make her care to commit him and his plight to the wild flings of fancy.

At last he opened his eyes and stared up at her vaguely. They were blue eyes. There was an odd, hunted glint in them, a smolder of recklessness, a shadow of sadness, exhaustion. He raised an uncertain hand to his bandaged head. He glanced around the room, then back at her, his wits clearing suddenly.

“Where am I? Whose—whose place is this?” he jerked out, with an effort.

“This is Lemuel Huntington’s ranch. I’m his daughter, Dot.” She thought a queer interest leaped into his eyes at the information. “You must be quiet, now. You’ve lost a lot of blood, but you’ll be all right,” she went on, when he did not speak. “If I fixed you something, could you eat?” She rose from her chair.

But he detained her, in a sudden spasm of apprehension. “My—my saddlebags! I—they——” he faltered hoarsely.

“They’re safe outside,” she nodded. “Do you want them?”

“Please, sister. Bring ’em here. Hurry! I—I want ’em handy.”

She ran out of the front door to the horse which still stood, untethered, on sagging legs. Unfastening the leather containers, she carried them into the house. She remarked that while they were not especially heavy, they bulged to capacity, their flaps buckled securely. She remarked also the man’s relief at sight of them and how profusely he thanked her. Then he instructed her to stow them under the head of the lounge and asked her for a drink of water. But when she returned with a dipperful, she found him sunk into a sleep of exhaustion. Whereupon she darkened the room, closed the door quietly behind her, and went outside again to look after the spent horse.

Watering the animal, she tied it in a stall in the barn to feed. Then she inspected the stranger’s saddle carefully. It was typical of the parts, without an identifying mark of any kind upon it, except splashes of dried blood. Presently she fastened the barn door and reentered the house. Her mysterious patient

still slept. It was a few minutes past noon, and she sat down to her customary warmed-over meal in the kitchen, but she could not eat.



## CHAPTER II—THE MAN HUNTER

As has been said, Dot Huntington was, notwithstanding her eighteen years, a child of romance. She had been “living scenes” ever since her mother told her the first bed-time story in the long, long ago. She had wished so many, many times in the past that something really thrilling might happen to her—a big, exciting adventure. At this moment she felt that that thrilling something had at last happened. Here was that big, exciting adventure begun. It was all like one of her tremendous, wonderful dreams come true.

She quivered rapturously in the realization that she was a flesh-and-blood factor in some great tragic mystery, that, hero or villain, this sick, wounded man was her patient, dependent on her. A surge of pity swept suddenly into her heart at the thought; an odd sense of responsibility followed, bringing with it a subtle gratification she keenly welcomed.

She told herself that this stranger had ridden in out of that vast mystic horizon where all her dreams had taken shape—like any one of the impossible beings she visualized—looking for attention, care, succor. Yes, she would heed his call—whether he was good or bad. Why, indeed, should she question the moral status of a man half dead? She sat for a long time, her warmed-over meal cold, ruminating thus. How he must have suffered out in that awful wilderness of sand and furnace heat!

Then again came the sound of approaching hoofs.

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